Pope Leo XIV faces a difficult challeng migration. He might be up to the tas

by J. Kevin Appleby May 13, 2025

A U.S. Border Patrol agent walks past four men being detained after crossing the border through a gap in the walls separa United States on Jan. 23, 2025, in San Diego. (AP Photo/Gregory Bull, File)

When Pope Francis died on April 21, Catholic advocates for immigrant rights felt a double loss. Not only did we lose the spiritual leader of our faith, but we also lost a strong moral voice on behalf of migrants and refugees globally. When Leo XIV was elected to the papacy two weeks later, our hope was renewed.

The new pontiff immediately identified the poor and outcast as a priority for the church. As a missionary in Peru, he has lived among the poor and has intimate knowledge of the root causes that compel persons to migrate in order to survive.

By taking the name of Leo, he underscored the importance of Catholic social teaching to his papacy—and affirmed that the vulnerable have the right to work and live in dignity. He seems perfectly positioned to speak with authority on behalf of migrants

and refugees around the world and to continue to fight the "globalization of indifference"—a fight waged by his predecessor—to the plight of persons on the move.

The new pope, however, will face a challenging migration situation in the world, with a record 117 million displaced persons, a record number of migrant deaths per year, and a series of wars in the Middle East, Africa and Europe continuing to produce refugees and displaced persons at a rapid rate. At the same time, the wealthiest nations are closing their doors to asylum seekers and severely limiting the amount of international assistance provided to the developing world.

Despite these challenges, and perhaps because of them, the church must continue to speak out on the issue of migration, not only from a human rights perspective but from a pastoral one. At least 30 percent of migrants around the world are Christians, with more than half of them Catholic. In the United States, 80 percent of the immigrants who may be deported under the Trump administration are Christians, with 61 percent of that group being Catholic.

But another challenge is that an influential minority of Catholics, both in the United States and Europe, oppose the church's teaching on migration and have attempted to justify their anti-immigrant views by mischaracterizing Catholic teaching on the issue.

Pope Francis' letter to the U.S. bishops opposing mass deportations, for example, was a response to Vice President JD Vance's attempt to rewrite Catholic teaching on migration using Thomas Aquinas's concept of ordo amoris ("order of love"). Advocates for migrants see it as a positive sign that a social media account under the name of then-Cardinal Prevost shared a column by **America** editor in chief Sam Sawyer, S.J., that criticized Mr. Vance on migration; a separate post from that X account, citing an article in the National Catholic Reporter, said that the vice-president was "wrong" on the issue.

As Cardinal Alvaro Ramazzini of Guatemala stated before the conclave, the cardinal electors placed a high priority on electing a leader who understands the importance of immigration to the church. While he may deploy a different style than his predecessor,

all signs (and tweets) indicate that our new pope will neither shrink from the positions staked out by Pope Francis nor relegate migration to a secondary issue during his papacy.

But Pope Leo could be tested early. As the Trump administration ramps up deportations and European countries implement more restrictive enforcement policies, some of the leaders of the developed nations, backed by nativist forces, will again attempt to morally justify their actions.

Pope Leo's voice will be crucial to stemming this false narrative and eventually convincing world leaders, and those who support them, to take a more humanitarian path. As an American who has voted in U.S. elections and presumably understands the complexities of U.S. politics, the new pope could connect especially with American Catholics, a majority of whom voted for the current administration.

What can Pope Leo XIV do in the weeks and months ahead to establish his voice on behalf of persons on the move around the world?

An early signal, perhaps in a speech, prayer or homily, that he will build upon Pope Francis' advocacy for immigrants could show that the church's defense of migrants is not tied to one pope but to 2,000 years of Catholic history and teaching.

The pope also should make the global migration crisis a primary issue in his first meetings with world leaders—and with their diplomats assigned to the Holy See—offering to work with them to find common ground on policies toward newcomers. This would communicate to them that the church will continue to defend the rights of migrants on the world stage.

He and his diplomatic corps could also raise two immediate migration issues with world leaders, consistent with his missionary experience and the early themes of his papacy. First, he could call for a global increase in legal avenues for immigrants to migrate and work in developed nations, underscoring the importance of the right to work and support a family as laid out in Pope Leo XIII's "Rerum Novarum."

Second, he could encourage a global effort to address the root causes of migration by calling for job creation in developing countries, adherence to the Paris climate accord and the resolution of regional conflicts.

Finally, it is important that the new pontiff make a public demonstration of his support for migrants and refugees. He need not travel to Lampedusa, as Pope Francis did, but could visit immigrants and refugees at some other location, either in Rome or during his inaugural trip abroad.

Francis rightly made migration a primary issue for his papacy and elevated the voice of the church on the issue. It is important, both for the church and the world, that our new pope, guided by his own style and tone of communication, develops and amplifies his own voice at a time of great peril for persons on the move.

At a time in world history when nativist movements are on the march, the global community needs a moral leader who can encourage nations to work together—to build bridges, not walls—to address the global migration crisis in a humane and equitable manner. Thankfully, the College of Cardinals has wisely elected a man who possesses the lived experience, compassion and pastoral vision to meet the challenge.